

SIDNEY A. KENT HOUSE  
2944 South Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Submitted to the  
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks  
November, 1985

SIDNEY A. KENT HOUSE  
2944 South Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

Constructed: 1882-83  
Architects: Burnham and Root

Prominent for its commercial designs, the partnership of Daniel Hudson Burnham and John Wellborn Root is additionally renowned for its residential work. During eighteen years of partnership, the firm produced more than two hundred residential designs alone, in addition to commissions received for hotels, office buildings, churches, railroad stations, apartment buildings, and other building types. Because of its well deserved reputation for architectural design as well as both Burnham and Root's professional and social acquaintances, the firm was called on to design large, elaborately detailed homes for some of the wealthiest families in the city. Noteworthy among these is their design for the Sidney A. Kent House, built in 1882 on South Michigan Avenue.

Now isolated on the street that it formerly shared with residences of similar scale and ostentation, the Kent House is a vestige from the period when South Michigan Avenue was an enclave of urban affluence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, the history of the house illuminates significant aspects of the social and economic history of Chicago. Its first two owners, Sidney Kent and John "Bet A Million" Gates were prominent capitalists for whom a residence as massive as this house suggested a level of cultivation consistent with their professional status. Beginning in 1910, the residential character of South Michigan Avenue began to change with the development of automobile showrooms and associated businesses on the street north of 26th Street. Over the last seventy-five years, commercial and educational uses and light industry have predominated on the Michigan Avenue frontage. Changes in property usage and large-scale land clearance for urban renewal efforts in this area brought about the demolition of most of the houses that contributed to Michigan Avenue's once prosperous identity. The adaptability of the house for various uses has enabled a variety of owners, including the current ones, to preserve the Kent House and with it an element of Chicago's history.

Affluent residential settlement within the present-day Near South Side and Douglas community areas was initiated in the mid-1860s along Wabash and Michigan avenues as

far south as Cermak Road. Michigan and Wabash were traditional prestige addresses, dating from the 1850s when polite society began to build on these streets for their proximity to the lakefront. But as commercial interests began to expand south and eastward, encroaching on these homes, their occupants simply built new homes farther south. In such a manner, Michigan and Wabash avenues became a traditional elite corridor stretching southward.

By the time of the Chicago Fire of 1871, fashionable society had moved south and east from the central area, occupying the district bounded generally by 16th and 22nd streets, Wabash and Prairie avenues. Within this area, Prairie Avenue was recognized as a street apart from the rest in terms of the wealth and prestige of its inhabitants and the size and detailing of their homes. Its reputation was only enhanced during the 1880s as millionaires continued to buy parcels on the street and build elaborate homes.

Residential development of the Near South Side elite district was diffused and intermittent until 1880, but it was significantly bolstered that year when Michigan Avenue was designated as a boulevard under the jurisdiction of the South Parks Commissioners. The landscaping generally associated with boulevards reinforced the cosmopolitan residential ideal of boulevard property owners, but the designation had a much more practical effect on real estate development. Because boulevard designation restricted property to residential usage and prohibited commercial traffic, boulevards were premium thoroughfares for residential development. Consequently, they attracted only wealthy families. Anchored on the west by Michigan Boulevard and on the east by Prairie Avenue, the elite character continued to dominate new construction between these streets north of 22nd. Moreover, South Michigan Boulevard's new identity promoted similar development farther south.

South Michigan Avenue quickly came to rival Prairie Avenue for the prominence of its residents. By 1891, circumstances were such that John J. Flinn stated in his popular *Standard Guide to Chicago* (1891) that:

I don't care what people may say about other streets and avenues--about Prairie, Calumet, Lake, Ellis, Grand, the Lake Shore Drive or Ashland--Michigan is the finest of them all. What a magnificent stretch of perfect roadway lies before us! How stately and how elegant the graceful residences of the boulevard, with their handsome lawns and their wide-spreading shade trees, rising on either side until the street narrows to a beautiful country lane, in our vision, a mile to the north! The roadway is as level as the top of a billiard table; and the clickity-click of the horses' feet over the well-kept pavement is music to our ears, and carries us back to the courier's ride in "Held by the Enemy." We are passing some of the finest mansions in the city now--mansions of the new and golden epoch in Chicago's history.

Many of the most notable figures in Chicago commerce and industry lived on South Michigan Boulevard between 16th and 46th streets. Among them were Ferdinand Peck,

principal promoter and financial backer of the Auditorium theater and hotel; James H. McVicker, founder and president of the McVicker's Theater Company; Henry Honore, real estate tycoon and father-in-law of Potter Palmer; meat-packing executives Michael Cudahy, Edward F. Swift, and Philip D. Armour, Jr.; cable car magnate Charles T. Yerkes; and retail entrepreneurs Simon and Emanuel Mandel, to name but a representative sampling.

A successful livestock executive, Sidney Kent was certainly among the notable residents on Michigan Boulevard. Kent, who was born on July 16, 1834 in Suffield, Connecticut, was similar in his ambitions to others of his generation who envisioned the commercial potential of the West. He moved to Illinois in 1853 and worked as a school teacher in Kane County before moving to Chicago a year later. In 1854, he and his older brother Albert formed a livestock packing and shipping company named A.E. Kent & Company. Although the brothers' operation was not as large as those of Cudahy, Swift, or Armour, its holdings and resources were substantial enough for Sidney Kent to include himself as one of the incorporators in a co-operative venture with other Chicago meat packers to establish the Union Stock Yard & Transit Company. Opened on Christmas day in 1865, the new consolidated stockyard replaced the many separate yards and established Chicago as the premier livestock processing center of the nation. Largely as a result of the success of this organization, both Kent brothers had amassed large fortunes by the time their company was incorporated in 1872 as the Chicago Packing and Provision Company, with Sidney Kent as president.

Mr. Kent was one of the business leaders of his day as indicated by the variety of companies with which he was involved. He was a member of the Board of Trade, serving as a director six times between 1865 and 1883. Kent served on the boards of several banks, including the Corn Exchange Bank for which he was a vice-president and later president; Merchants Loan Trust and Savings Bank; Northern Trust Bank; Metropolitan Bank; and American Trust and Savings Bank. Kent was also active in a number of other companies as a member of the board of directors for the Kirby Carpenter Company, which had extensive interests in lumber, lands, and mills on the Menominee River in Michigan; the Santa Fe Railroad Company; West Chicago Street Railway; Union Iron Company; and the Illinois Steel Company. He had an interest in utilities as a large stock holder in the Chicago Traction Company and through his involvement with the consolidation of various small gas companies into the Peoples Gas Light and Coke Company.

By 1882, Kent's professional status was well established, and the evolving ambience of Michigan Boulevard must have appealed to his sense of social propriety. In the immediate vicinity of 29th and Michigan, the streetscape was still taking shape. There were several well built residences, handsomely detailed brick row houses and town houses on typical narrow city lots for the most part. However, the well-heeled character of the street was more emphatically suggested by the substantial homes on large lots that had already been erected or were just then under construction. Among these were the homes for Marx Wineman (1882; Adler & Sullivan, architects), Augustus H. Byram (1881) at 2909, and Albert H. Hayden (1879) at 3155. The latter two houses, as well as the Calumet Club (1881) at 20th and Michigan, were designed by Burnham and Root. Obviously, Kent's

selection of Burnham and Root as architects for his new house was not arbitrary and must have been based in large part on his impressions of the quality of their nearby work. But it is also likely that his choice was influenced by business associate John B. Sherman, who in addition to being general superintendent of the Union Stock Yard & Transit Company, was also Daniel Burnham's father-in-law.

Few firms in the history of American architecture can approach the reputation of Burnham and Root for the volume and quality of work that came out of their office. In eighteen years of partnership, they designed more than 350 structures, estimated at \$40 million worth of construction. In terms of design, John Root especially gave the firm a high standard by developing what historian J.A. Chewning, in his article on Root for the 1982 *Macmillan Encyclopedia of Architects*, described as "a design sensibility responsive to both the technical demands of the tall office building and the historical mandate for an eclecticism appropriate to the times." The firm's ability to subordinate the demands of historical styles to the technical and functional needs of various building types was a hallmark of their practice.

Dissimilar in their backgrounds, the two men nonetheless complemented each other by their skills and temperaments. John Root was born in Georgia in 1850 to an established Southern family of comfortable means. Raised in Atlanta, Root was not formally educated but studied at home, his subjects including music and drawing. In the midst of the Civil War and Sherman's occupation of Atlanta, Root's father arranged to have his fourteen-year-old son smuggled out of the country to prevent the boy's conscription. He spent the next two years in Liverpool, England before returning to the United States to study civil engineering at New York University. After graduating in 1869, Root remained in New York and worked for James Renwick and later John B. Snook over the next three years. At some point in his New York stay, Root met architect Peter B. Wight who, after coming to Chicago in 1871 to participate in the rebuilding of the city after the 1871 fire, invited the younger architect to Chicago to become foreman for the newly established partnership of Carter, Drake & Wight. Root arrived in Chicago early in 1872.

It was in the office of Carter & Wight that Root met Daniel Burnham. Burnham's path to the firm had been as varied in experiences as Root's, but with experiences decidedly less architectural. Burnham was born in Henderson, New York in 1846 into a household dominated by Swedenborgian thought and its Anglo-American ancestry. Daniel Burnham's earliest American ancestor came to this country in 1635 and settled in Massachusetts. Despite the family's long-standing presence in New England, Daniel Burnham's mother felt that Chicago had more promise than Henderson as a city in which to raise and educate children. Accordingly, she encouraged her husband to seek employment here, and some time during the 1850s, after the elder Burnham found employment with a wholesale drug business, the family moved to Chicago. Burnham graduated from Central High School in 1865 but showed disdain for a college education. He worked briefly as a salesman for a merchantile house before deciding his interests were in architecture. In 1868, Burnham took a job as a draftsman in the office of Sanford Loring and William Le Baron Jenney. Within a year, however, Burnham was distracted from his architectural pursuits by a friend's proposal to seek fame and fortune in the Nevada gold fields.

For the next two years, Burnham and his high school friend Edward C. Waller staked barren claims. Despite their lack of success, Burnham was struck by the vitality of the region and chose to stay to run for a seat in the state senate. Losing the election, Burnham returned to Chicago and re-evaluated his professional situation. He finally returned to architecture in 1871, working in the offices of John Van Osdel and Otis Leonard Wheelock before establishing his own practice with Gustave Lareau. That partnership soon dissolved and in 1872 he joined the firm of Carter, Drake & Wight where he met his future architectural collaborator.

Burnham and Root resigned from Carter, Drake & Wight in the spring of 1873 and formed their partnership on the strength of a commitment for work from realtor George A. Chambers, a friend of Root. The financial panic of 1873, however, stopped all building activity, including Chambers' proposed development, and left the firm without any clients. The partners managed to eke out a living from a few commissions and from freelance positions with other architects. Later in 1873, Chambers recommended Burnham and Root's services to a business associate, John B. Sherman, who was interested in building a house and barn at Prairie Avenue and 21st Street. That commission was propitious for the firm and Daniel Burnham especially, according to Louise Carroll Wade in her article, "Burnham & Root's Stockyards Connection" *Chicago History*, Fall 1975. The house, an eloquent essay in the then-popular Gothic revival style, was a masterpiece for the firm. Burnham benefitted personally through his dealings with the Sherman family. He met, fell in love with, and in 1876 married John Sherman's daughter Margaret.

Burnham and Root's practice improved with the economy and received a substantial boost through connections promoted by Burnham's father-in-law. As general superintendent of the Union Stock Yard & Transit Company, Sherman was in a strong position to help the architects obtain commissions for stockyard buildings as well as for residences and commercial structures for businessmen associated with the livestock center. Over the years, this association combined with their well-known architectural skills to bring them dozens of commissions.

During the 1870s, Burnham and Root's designs were largely limited to houses, but this changed with commissions for the Grannis (1880-81) and Montauk (1881-82) blocks. As important as these two buildings were in promoting the identity of the firm among the business community at large, they also led the way in the formulation of a new building design esthetic within the Chicago architectural community. Their straightforward design contrasted with the excessive surface ornament of other buildings of the era and set the pattern for the architectural form that came to be recognized as the principal characteristic of the Chicago school of commercial architecture.

Constant throughout all of Burnham and Root's designs is a strong design sense in the handling of materials, form, proportion, and color. Stylistically, the firm is known for its interpretations of the Richardsonian Romanesque, but their early work drew on Gothic precedents as evidenced in the Sherman House. As architectural tastes changed to favor the eclectic Queen Anne, their detailing was derived from Renaissance forms in French and Flemish architecture. The variety of styles and compositions employed gave vitality

to their residential designs. Root chided himself for the multiformity among his buildings in an essay he wrote a few months before his death on January 15, 1891 and which was published anonymously in the *Inland Architect and News Record* (January 8, 1891). In his appraisal of various Chicago architects he somewhat facetiously observed that:

Mr. Root, upon whom has largely devolved [Burnham and Root's] designing, seems to have been too facile always to carefully reconsider his designs, and to have been to a large extent the victim of his own moods.

In fact, Root did develop individualized stylistic interpretations in response to the specific needs of a client or building type as well as to his own artistic temperament of the moment.

The Kent House, especially in terms of its monochromy and frank acceptance of broad wall surfaces, marks a significant progression from Burnham and Root's residential designs of the 1870s by its relative simplicity. The house is essentially cubic in its massing, a generously scaled asymmetrically arranged, 3-story structure surfaced primarily in red pressed brick and matching terra cotta. It is capped by a hipped roof with a central flat deck originally detailed with a terra-cotta balustrade. The roof is punctuated by a series of masonry dormers, one large dormer on each of the four elevations with those on the north and south sides flanked by two smaller dormers. Two brick chimneys penetrate the north and south sides of the roof as well. Window openings on the mass of the house are expansive and plentiful, especially on the front, or east, facade. A rounded masonry oriel projects from the front at the first floor on the east side and is echoed in a smaller oriel toward the rear on the south elevation. An angular three-sided bay is also situated on the south facade. An arched *porte cochere* adjoins the house on the north.

The house is a good example of an early urban Queen Anne style of architecture. The "Queen Anne" sobriquet is somewhat misleading as none of its forms harken back specifically to early eighteenth-century English architecture in the manner that the Victorian Gothic referred to specific elements of Medieval Gothic. It refers instead to the similarity between architecture of the nineteenth century and that of Queen Anne's reign (1702-1714) in which classical detailing is selectively employed on vernacular building forms. In addition to classical detailing, the style is chiefly characterized by its plasticity. In a speech to the Western Association of Architects in 1886, Root described the chronology of styles, satirizing them one by one, including the Queen Anne:

Then came the "Tubercular Style," sometimes called by the facetious "Queen Anne." This style is characterized by two sorts of eruptions, external and internal. . . . Viewed externally, you will recognize this style by its varied and highly colored eruptive features. Generally the affected house is red as to the scalp, with a complexion of all colors, from cobalt blue to saffron yellow. Its eruptive tendencies manifest themselves in all sorts of things, from wens to carbuncles and ringworms.

Root's "eruptions" on the Kent House are restrained but are present in the form of the oriel and bays and dormers, and chimneys protruding from the mass. It lacks the variety

of color Root referred to, but this is more a result of the architect's own ideas on color than a stylistic shortcoming. The deep red coloring of the brick and terra cotta is, however, characteristic of the Queen Anne.

The detailing and overall composition of the house are derived from French Renaissance architecture of the early sixteenth century. Features of the style are reflected in the picturesque but symmetrical roof arrangement, the layering effect produced by the horizontal coursing atop the first and second stories, and by the ornamental styling itself. The wrought-iron fence surrounding the property, added more than a decade later, augments the French character. It initially was used in the French Pavilion of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, and was bought by Kent after the fair's closing. Chateausque French architecture was a favorite of Root's, and interestingly, was utilized by the architect on the same block as the Kent House the previous year. The Augustus H. Byram House was built in 1881 at 29th Street and Michigan Avenue. In contrast to the Kent House, the Byram House was faced with limestone and its detailing was derived more from the Gothic than from the Renaissance, but the massing and the French detailing indicate a striking affinity between these two designs.

John Root was an articulate and thoughtful spokesman for his profession at a time when technical innovations and social change were forcing architects to re-appraise architectural design. Architecture was not exempt from the movement to establish an identity indigenous to this country. From this perspective, the derivative styling of the Kent House seems regressive. Root believed that stylistic treatments were superficial to a degree, stating at a symposium before the Illinois State Association of Architects (printed in the *Inland Architect and News Record* for March, 1887) that "Styles of architecture grow out of deeper conditions than mere matters of exterior ornament, or even of internal arrangement; and our American styles will probably, for a long time, go no further than the modifications, to a greater or lesser degree, of what we have." He went on to say that "Americans will continue to exercise the greatest latitude of choice in the selection of architectural types, but each will become so thoroughly impressed by national conditions, and so molded by the national mind, that beneath and beyond all styles of superficial expression will be seen the type American." As evidenced in the composition of the Kent House, Root's design sensibilities were not slavishly dictated by historical precedent. Rather he subordinated historical references to more functional, more purely architectural, concepts.

Root's personalized interpretations of purely architectural precepts are illustrated in the Kent design. In his essay titled "Style" in the January, 1887 issue of *Inland Architect and Record*, the architect proposed that positive attributes in people were equally applicable to good building design. Among those was the quality of repose which, as applied to architecture, stressed restraint in color and simple wall treatments.

The value of plain surfaces in every building is not to be overestimated. Strive for them, and when the fates place at your disposal a good, generous sweep of masonry, accept it frankly. If this goodly surface comes at the corners of your building, so much the better; for there can be no better guaranty that the house will "stay where it was put" than the presence in



it of masses of simple masonry at its angles.

As to repose in color, you will at once know all that can be said by me, and will sympathize with the utter condemnation of the use of sharply conflicting colors in a design for any structure of considerable size.

Root was adept in his handling of forms and materials, so that repose in color and wall treatment did not produce a monotonous effect but rather invigorated his designs. The quality of the Kent House brick in color and texture gives a subdued richness to the unadorned surfaces. The corners of the house are diminished, and the plasticity of the composition enhanced, by rounded brick. In terms of color, the blending of a red sandstone and a deep red pressed brick with matching terra cotta, render a pleasing monochromy. These various aspects complement each other well and give the design a distinctive sculptural quality.

The French Renaissance was a popular interior design motif in fashionable urban dwellings from the early 1860s through the mid-1880s, and thus the continuation of such motifs from the exterior of the Kent House to its interior was consistent with prevalent tastes in interior decoration. The architects left no doubt of the prevailing motif and unity of their plan, as indicated in a brief description of the house supplied by the firm to the *Chicago Tribune* and published on October 1, 1882:

It is designed in the renaissance of Francis I, the front being decorated with elaborate carvings in panels of red terra cotta and rich friezes. . . . The first and second stories are finished in hard wood, the first floor being designed to embody in its detail and decorative carvings employed, the peculiar richness and delicacy of the French chateau of the period.

Most of the original decorative scheme, especially as revealed by wall and ceiling treatments, has been lost through redecorations by subsequent owners. However, decorative arts expert Robert Furhoff recently documented some of the Kent House wall finishes, revealing a sampling of period tastes. The first-floor northeast parlor was stenciled and hand-painted in a dense pattern of leaves and small flowers overlaying a secondary pattern of abstract, fan-shaped forms. Green, gold gilt, and bluegreen were its colors. The second-floor northeast bedroom, in contrast, had a wall treatment more in keeping with the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris and his English contemporaries. The walls were papered with a Morris-inspired design featuring stylized peonies in a dense field of natural leaf forms. Above this was an Anglo-Japanese frieze of a stylized papyrus. The cove and ceiling combined a traditional French Renaissance stencil with Anglo-Japanese inspired cartwheels and sunbursts, all done in pink, gold gilt, and shades of yellow. The popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement in the United States coincided with that of the French Renaissance, and its use in the Kent House reflects the eclecticism of the period.

Most of the woodwork--mahogany, oak, and possibly walnut--has survived and been well preserved. Aside from ornamental bands of spiraling vines, it does not suggest the prevailing French theme, yet it does evidence the richness of the overall detailing. Most of the first-floor public rooms have a dado of panelled hardwood and feature a fireplace

of either ceramic or glass tiles imported from England. The first-floor stairhall, with its intricately carved and lathe-turned balustrade, is a particularly striking example of wood craftsmanship.

Although not as dynamic in plan as some of its contemporaries, especially those houses done in wood, the Kent House does have the openness and spacious quality in its room arrangements that is typical of Queen Anne architecture. Most of its major rooms are arranged along the south side of the central entrance in order to take advantage of natural illumination. The parlor, library, and dining room, from east to west, were sited on this side of the house while a private office, stairhall with elevator, and kitchen occupied the north side of the ground floor. A small solarium with stained glass transoms projects from the south side of the dining room. The second floor was all bedrooms. Servants' quarters were located at the rear of the third floor, the front having a spacious ballroom. In order to preserve the house, the current owners have had to divide the house into five spacious apartments. This work was done with sensitivity for the historic fabric of the house, retaining all of the remaining woodwork, and dividing spaces in a reversible manner should the opportunity exist for a future owner to restore the structure to its single-family use.

Sidney Kent moved into his house in 1883, but lived in it only intermittently after 1892. His apparent enjoyment of the house was beneficial to its architects: Kent's position with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad helped influence Burnham and Root's selection as the architects of their general office building in Topeka, Kansas (1884) and the Montezuma Hotel (1885) in Las Vegas, New Mexico.

During the years of his active residence in the house, Kent found himself, head of a major meat-packing company, in the unusual position of supporting the eight-hour work-day proposed by labor unions. Largely as a result of his backing, the eight-hour system was adopted throughout the stockyards from May through November, 1886, when management reaction to broader labor turmoil led to a termination of the system. Kent was away from Chicago when the system was repealed and during the ensuing battle for its re-installation. Nevertheless, his initial support won him the admiration of laborers. After his death in 1900, Kent was eulogized by labor leader George A. Schilling as an enlightened executive "who in 1886, championed and conceded the eight-hour day to his employees." "He believed," Schilling went on to say, "its universal adoption would result in a broader intelligence and a higher standard of life for the masses and insure the more general progress of society."

In 1888, Kent stepped down from the presidency of the Chicago Packing and Provision Company to become its vice-president, the position from which he retired in 1892. Thereafter, he spent considerable time abroad and at his boyhood home in Suffield, Connecticut, but he remained active in Chicago business and philanthropy, maintaining an office on LaSalle Street. His most notable gift was the Kent Chemical Hall at the University of Chicago. The university had not opened when Kent committed himself to the funding of the construction and furnishing of a chemistry hall for the new school. When the three-story Collegiate Gothic structure was dedicated on January 2, 1894, only the Cobb Lec-

ture Hall and the divinity school dormitories were constructed. As noted by Thomas Wakefield Goodspeed, in *The University of Chicago Biographical Sketches* (Vol. 1), "When, therefore, Mr. Kent put nearly a quarter of a million dollars into the first scientific laboratory he redeemed the architectural future of the University from meanness and insignificance and gave it permanently that commodiousness, richness, impressiveness, and beauty which have given it distinction throughout the educational world." Mr. Kent's philanthropy set a standard for future development of the university campus.

In 1896, Kent sold his house to John "Bet A Million" Gates (1855-1911) who resided there on and off for the next twelve years. Gates was one of Chicago's most colorful business entrepreneurs, having made his fortune in barbed wire. Starting his association with the wire industry in 1876 as a salesman, Gates acquired a fortune through a variety of industry manipulations, and by 1900 he was the head of the Federal Steel Company, capitalized at \$100,000,000. After 1900, Gates vied with J. Pierpont Morgan and Andrew Carnegie for leadership in the steel industry, but he was out-manuevered by Morgan in 1907 for control of the United States Steel Corporation. According to the *Dictionary of American Biography*, Gates's significance was "said to lie chiefly in the application of the rough qualities of the frontier to the realm of big business."

Gates's speculative spirit showed itself best in his sporting pursuits. Although his nickname was given to him by British journalists in 1900 for his more conventional horse-race gambling, Gates was open to wagering substantial sums on almost any physical endeavor. In their biography of Gates, *Bet A Million: The Story of John W. Gates*, Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan describe a scene in which Gates and a business associate would "stand by the window of the office after a heavy April rain, watching raindrops course slowly down the pane and betting \$1,000 on the first drop to reach the bottom." From his business speculation and gambling, Kent amassed a considerable estate, estimated at around \$40,000,000 at the time of his death.

By the time that Gates moved from his South Michigan Avenue home in 1908, the forces that were to transform this thoroughfare from an enclave for Chicago's elite to commercial and low-income residential district were already in motion farther north along the street. Beginning around 1905, businesses associated with the automobile trade began to buy up former residential property on South Michigan Avenue, its exceptionally deep lots being suitable for the showroom and warehousing needs of the trade. The greatest concentration of automobile showrooms was between 12th and 26th streets, but the transformation quickly affected adjacent areas. The automobile trade was the most direct influence on the changing character of the avenue, but in fact Chicago's booming economy at the turn of the century extended the boundaries of the central business district and the supporting businesses at its periphery. The encroachment of commercial concerns on wealthy neighborhoods was only a function of the professional success of the residents of such neighborhoods.

John Gates sold the house at 2944 South Michigan to Michael D. Spades, a millionaire from Indianapolis. Spades, who died around 1915, was the last owner to occupy the house as a single-family residence. In 1915, his estate sold the house to the National

Kindergarten and Elementary College for use as an educational facility. During the fourteen years that the school occupied the house, a familiar inexorable urban process played itself out in the surrounding neighborhood. Most if not all of the monied owners moved to more fashionable neighborhoods or to the suburbs, selling their homes to owners who quickly converted them into rooming houses. A 1929 street directory shows several listings for "furnished rooms" on the 2900-block of Michigan Avenue. The coach house of the Kent House was occupied by the Pulson Institute for Mechanics, and the house itself was listed as "vacant."

In 1929, Frank L. Lewis, a manufacturer and philanthropist, bought the property and turned it over to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Chicago. Initial plans called for using the house as a nurses' home for the Lewis Memorial Maternity Hospital which was to occupy the former Lakota Hotel at 30th Street and Michigan Avenue. It is unclear if these plans were carried out, but by 1934 the Kent House was being operated as a hotel for boys by the Catholic Youth Organization, a nationwide group founded in Chicago by the Most Reverend Bernard J. Sheil.

Sustained ownership by an entity as large as the Catholic Archdiocese, as well as thorough maintenance of the property, probably saved the house from otherwise certain demolition in the wake of the land clearance and urban renewal efforts in the Near South Side and Douglas communities in the 1950s. The new developments which replaced the elaborate homes of Chicago's business leaders stabilized the economy of the surrounding community, but left the house isolated from the historic fabric of which it was so vital an element.

In 1947, use of the house was again changed from the C.Y.O. hotel to a convent for St. James Parish. St. James Church, a Joliet limestone Gothic structure designed by Patrick C. Keely and constructed in 1880 at the corner of 29th Street and Wabash Avenue, is the only other structure in the immediate vicinity which is contemporary with the Kent House.

Throughout these various ownerships, the house survived largely intact. Some time after 1915, windows were cut into the third-floor masonry on the east elevation to accommodate institutional uses. Prior to this, possibly when John Gates purchased the property, a grouping of heavily mullioned windows on the first floor of the east elevation was altered to form two conventional windows.

The Catholic Archdiocese sold the Kent property to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Campbell, its current owners, in 1981. Its massive size precluded the use of the house as a single-family residence, and the Campbells have converted the structure into five large apartments. The work was carefully done, leaving the exterior unchanged and retaining all of the historic fabric on the interior. Their enthusiasm for the property and investment in it bodes well for the preservation of the house.

The Kent House is a vital element of Chicago's history and its legacy of innovative architecture. In addition to its associations with two important figures in Chicago commerce, Sidney Kent and John Gates, the house also suggests the former grandeur of the

South Michigan Avenue streetscape. Beyond these traditional perspectives, the succession of individual and institutional owners and the circumstances affecting their ownership demonstrate the dynamism of broader urban development trends. On the continuum of architectural history, the residence is a transitional structure, moving away from the historical design eclecticism of its day toward the functional, non-derivative architecture of the modern movement. The unusually wide areas of plate glass windows and the accent on wide undecorated exterior wall surfaces indicates an emphasis on utilitarian characteristics over questions of academic styling, and its overall plasticity is an important trait of such notable subsequent designs as the Rookery (209 S. LaSalle; 1886; designated a Chicago Landmark on July 5, 1972) and the original portion of the Monadnock Building (53 W. Jackson; 1891; designated a Chicago Landmark on November 14, 1973). In these design tendencies, John Root was similar to an architect six years his junior, Louis Sullivan. The difference between them was the degree of their movement away from the prevailing architectural grammar of their day. With the Kent House, Root showed his talent for blending the historical elements that were prevalent during his time with more abstract architectural concepts that looked toward the purer expression of modern architecture.









Dining Room, House of Sidney A. Kent





